

Another Comeback: Fort Defiance nips Turner Ashby 64 - 63

They did it again! For the fourth time in five games, the Fort Defiance Indians managed to stage a late fourth quarter comeback to squeeze out a 64 – 63 win over the Turner Ashby Knights on the TAHS home floor on December 16. Fort found itself down 63 – 58 with 1:41 to go in the game but outscored the Knights 6 – 0 over the remaining time, overcoming a last second shot by TA's Henry Riner that missed. The shot was actually tipped in by a teammate but just after the buzzer had sounded. The Indians made only 2 of 15 three point attempts in the second half but one of those was a banked trey from the top of the key by Evan Braun with 40 seconds left which erased a 63 – 61 lead by the home team. The win extends Fort's record in the young season to 5 – 0; TAHS fell to 2 – 4.

The game was nip and tuck the entire time. TA opened the game with a three pointer before Carter Berry got Fort started with a deuce on an out-of-bounds play. Gio Armandariz Cruz scored on a drive but Turner Ashby responded to take a 5 – 4 lead with 5:42 to go in the first quarter. Gio again got two points on a drive to return the lead to Fort but TAHS got another trey to give the Knights an 8 – 6 lead. Fort went nearly six minutes without scoring while Turner Ashby scored again to take a 10 – 6 lead. Finally, Jasigh Ransome got two with 48.2 seconds left and that's how the quarter ended, 10 – 8 in favor of TA.

The home team extended their lead to 14 – 8 to open the second quarter. Tripp Hanger then fired in a three pointer from the corner, making it 14 – 8. Then, Gus Gutshall muscled his way to an offensive rebound, scored, and was fouled. He made his free throw which tied the score at 14's with 7:13 to go in the quarter. Gio's drive returned the lead to FDHS, 16 – 14, then he got two more on a drive to make it 18 – 14 before TAHS closed to 18 – 16. Jasigh then pumped in a three pointer to give FD a five point lead, 21 – 16. TAHS scored then Tripp got a rare goal for this Fort team—a pull up 10 foot jump shot, making the score 23 – 18. Fort's biggest lead of the night came next as Evan hit a three pointer and Fort's lead improved to 26 – 18. Turner Ashby then made successive three point shots to get back within two, 36 – 24, before Gus again scored in close. TA would get the last points of the quarter which ended in Fort's favor, 28 – 26.

In the first half, Fort Defiance had 11 turnovers and made only 2 of 9 attempts from beyond the three point arc yet managed to hold on to a lead.

The third quarter was tight from beginning to end. TAHS quickly tied the score before Tripp hit another three pointer to give Fort a 31 – 28 lead. TA responded with a triple of their own and followed that up with two field goals in the paint to take a 35 – 31 lead. Gus then was fouled after he snared an offensive rebound. He made both free throws and with 5:46 to go Fort was down only two points. TA scored again then Tripp answered with two on a drive. Another triple from the Knights extended their lead to 40 – 35. At that point, a technical foul was called on TA. Gio made one of two free throws but he was fouled on the ensuing in-bounds play and this time he made both foul shots to get Fort back within two at 40 – 38. Ayden Thornton was fouled in the lane and he converted both of his free throws to tie the score at 40's. At this point, Fort had

made 8 – 9 free throws for the night, a marked improvement over previous games. The good free throw shooting didn't last, though.

After TAHS made a basket to give them a 42 – 40 lead, Evan was fouled attempting a three point shot. He made only one of his three free throws then TA converted to take a 44 – 41 lead with 2:58 to go. Evan then scored on a drive, was fouled, and this time hit his foul shot to tie the score at 44's. TAHS went up 46 – 44 with 2:16 to go and made two foul shots to extend their lead to 48 – 44. Gio got two and Elijah Pultz scored inside to tie the score. Gio's two pointer with 28 seconds to go gave Fort a 50 – 48 lead but TAHS scored in the waning seconds to tie it at the end of the third period. After shooting free throws so well earlier in the game, Fort made only two of its last eight in that quarter.

The Knights opened the final period with a three pointer then Elijah took a nice pass from Tripp and scored with 6:57 to go. Rhyland, who had missed numerous three point attempts throughout the game, finally got the ball to fall in from inside the arc which pulled the Indians ahead by one, 54 – 53. Gus then got a good pass from Jasigh and scored to push the lead to 56 – 53. TAHS again came back with a three point shot and followed it with a deuce to take a 58 – 56 lead. Rhyland tied it with two on a drive with 3:14 to go. Another triple by the home team's Jayden Lacey, the team's ninth of the evening, gave TA a 61 – 58 lead. Two free throws by Riner made the score 63 – 58 with 1:41 and set the stage for Fort's dramatic comeback.

It started with Gio making one of two free throws. After a nice steal, Bradley got his only bucket of the night in the lane, making the score 63 – 61. On Fort's next possession, with 40 seconds to go, Evan rose from the top of the key and banked home his go-ahead three pointer. Fort then managed to get a steal but turned the ball back over with 24.7 seconds left. TAHS held the ball until 9.2 seconds remained and called time out. The ball ended up in Riner's hands but his three pointer was off the mark and the tip-in came just a fraction of a second after the buzzer had sounded as Fort escaped with another nail-biting win, 64 - 63.

For the game, Fort made only 5 of 25 three point attempts. From the free throw line, they ended up 11 – 19. They committed 17 turnovers, 11 of which were in the first half. Their defense was again very good, causing many Turner Ashby turnovers. All in all, it was a good win, Fort's fourth against Division 3 teams, as they improved their record to 5 – 0.

Gio led Fort's scoring with 16. Evan and Tripp each had 10 and Gus scored nine. Sophomore Lacey scorched the nets for 29 for TAHS including seven three pointers. Interestingly, Turner Ashby had only nine players dressed for the game and had five coaches on the bench.

Grandfather's notes: Gus played sparingly tonight and still ended up scoring nine points on 3 – 6 shooting from the field and 3 – 3 from the free throw line. By my records, he got six offensive rebounds. In a tight game like this one, every point is important and Gus did his job. So far this season, Gus is the second leading scorer on the team with an 8.2 ppg average.

Fort returns to action with a trip to Strasburg on Saturday to face Sherando in the Ram Hardwood Classic.

Here's Fort's box score:

Name	2 Pt Goals	3 Pt Goals	Free Throws	Total
John Whetzel	0	0	0-0	0
Bradley Hebb	1	0	0-2	2
Jasigh Ransome	1	1	0-2	5
Gio Armendariz Cruz	6	0	4-6	16
Miguel Uribe	0	0	0-0	0
Evan Braun	1	2	2-4	10
Carter Berry	1	0	0-0	2
Rhylan Martin	2	0	0-0	4
Elijah Pultz	2	0	0-0	4
Tripp Hanger	2	2	0-0	10
Connor Batten	0	0	0-0	0
Ayden Thornton	0	0	2-2	2
Gus Gutshall	3	0	3-3	9
TOTAL	19	5	11-19	64

The Staunton News Leader had a nice article about the game complete with several pictures:

Late 3 sparks Fort win

BRIDGEWATER — Evan Braun hit one fourth-quarter basketball Monday, maybe Fort Defiance's biggest one of the night in a 64-63 win over Turner Ashby in boys basketball.

With 1:11 left, Bradley Hebb's bucket cut the Turner Ashby lead to two. Then, as Turner Ashby brought the ball up the court, Fort's pressure forced a turnover. Gio Armendariz Cruz got the ball and drove the lane, giving the Fort junior a good look at a shot to tie the game, but the ball bounced off the front of the rim.

In the battle for the rebound, Hebb came away with the ball and threw it back out to Braun standing at the top of the key. Braun calmly banked in a 3-pointer to give Fort a lead with 45 seconds remaining.

"It felt like slow motion," Braun said. "Bradley got the board and kicked it out. I had the open look and I knew it was coming off the bank as soon as I shot it, but whatever works."

Turner Ashby turned the ball over on its next possession, but Fort gave it right back and, with 25 seconds left, Turner Ashby had the ball with a chance to win. They held the ball for the final shot, never really getting a good look against the Fort defense, until the final seconds when the Knights got off a 3-point attempt that hit the back of the rim and bounced off, giving Fort Defiance the win.

Braun finished with 10 points Monday, one of three Fort players in double figures. It was Fort Defiance's fifth win in five games, but four of those have been by five points or less. Fort beat Turner Ashby 10 days earlier by three points.



Fort Defiance's Gus Gutshall battles two Turner Ashby players for the ball Monday night in boys basketball. Patrick Hite/The New Leader

"I think our chemistry together is pretty good to start the season," Braun said of the ability to win the close games. "We just go out there and play our hardest. "

Fort Defiance trailed by five with 1:54 left after TA's Henry Riner knocked down two free throws. Fort then scored the game's final six points to rally for the win.

"You could see that they still believed, there was no panic," Fort Defiance coach Mike Gale said. "You like to see that as a coach, late game, no quit. You can see it in their eyes, 'We've still got a shot.' There's been times in the past teams that I've coached, you could see we were probably done for the night, even that small deficit."

Gale credits a lot of the late-game ability to veteran players. There are only juniors and seniors on the roster this year, all players with experience. Gale has never had a team without at least one sophomore or freshman on the team. Eight of the players are returners to the varsity this season.

That pays off late in games. Gale said he can only coach so much. Eventually, the players have to execute.

"You can't be out there with them," he said. "They've just got to make plays and they did enough of that tonight."

Armendariz Cruz led Fort with 16 points. Tripp Hanger added 10 points and Gus Gutshall finished with nine.

Fort Defiance is off until Saturday when it plays Sherando at Strasburg High School in the Ram Hardwood Classic. Fort tips at 3 p.m.

The Harrisonburg Daily News Record had this article about the game:

BOYS BASKETBALL | FORT DEFIANCE 64, TURNER ASHBY 63
Braun lifts Indians to thrilling win

By JOHN BREEDEN Daily News-Record
Dec 17, 2024

Squeaking out a win in the final minutes of the game continues to be a theme for Fort Defiance this season.

The latest example was Monday night in Bridgewater as the Indians faced Turner Ashby in non-district action, a rematch from Dec. 6 when the Indians defeated the Knights 59-56 after trailing for the bulk of the contest.

Monday's night contest saw a similar scenario as Fort found itself trailing by five with under two minutes to go after a 3-point basket from TA sophomore guard Jayden Lacey and a pair of free throws from Knights senior guard Henry Riner.

The Indians cut the gap to two with 1:11 remaining in regulation. Then, junior forward Evan Braun sealed the deal. With 50 seconds left on the clock, Braun found a wide-open 3-pointer that he knocked down to put the Indians ahead by one. From there, the Indians hung on to defeat the Knights 64-63 inside Larry S. Pence Gymnasium and complete the regular-season sweep. "We definitely have experience in the close games," Braun said. "We know what we need to do — play hard. The other teams get tired by the time it gets to the fourth quarter and we just do what we need to do."

Second-year Fort Defiance head coach Mike Gale, also the former head coach of Fort's girls team, noted they've been in a handful of late-game situations this season, and the experience can only help them.

Whether it's hitting a 3-pointer or grabbing a steal, Gale said they have different players stepping up night in and night out, which helps the Indians close the show.

"I'm just proud of them," Gale said. "A lot of things went against us there — battling injuries throughout the night and whatever. Playing as many guys as we do, different guys are going to step up on different nights. Just fortunate enough to get another road win."

On this occasion, it was Braun who stepped up and sunk a clutch 3-point shot to secure the victory.

"He does a lot for us," Gale said. "He plays three different positions. The whole team, we're still learning and trying to figure out what we're doing. We're kinda learning on the fly and trying to get better."

Junior Giovanni Armendariz Cruz led the Indians with 16 points while Braun and junior guard Tripp Hanger each pitched in 10 points.

Having a veteran squad is why Gale believes the Indians thrive under the pressure of a close-score affair, noting that he doesn't have a single freshman or sophomore on the roster.

"It's only got to help you," Gale said. "When you have, I believe, eight returners that played last year, there's nothing better than having experienced guys that have been through different things and are able to pull things out that you can't coach. You can't be out there with them, they've just got to make plays and they did enough of that tonight."

On the other end, the Knights had a shot to pull off the dagger as Riner launched a 3-pointer at the buzzer, but the shot fell short. TA head coach Clay Harris immediately went up to console Riner, who was visibly frustrated following the shot.

"I thought it was a great look," Harris said. "We had a great look at it and he's one of the shooters we want to get the shot up. I just told him to keep his head up, I thought it was a great look. He shot it with confidence, we had a great look at it, and it just didn't fall."

Despite the loss, it was a monster game for Lacey who tallied a game-high 29 points, a 6-foot-4 youngster who continues to shine for the Knights as a sophomore.

"He's a great player," Harris said. "He's a very skilled player and when he plays with confidence, he's a really great player. What I really liked about him today was he was a little bit more aggressive, especially on the defensive end, going and grabbing some boards. ... I thought [Lacey] was very assertive on offense, looked for his shot, and shot it with confidence. When he shoots it with confidence, we like that."

Sophomore guard Anthony Perez contributed 11 points for the Knights while junior forward Jackson Good notched 10 points.

The Knights fell short to the Indians again, but Harris couldn't be disappointed with his team's heart as they fought until the very end.

"I'm just proud of our team," Harris said. "I thought we stuck together. We had some adversity, especially in that third quarter. There were a lot of fouls and it could've gone one way, but I thought we stuck together and gave ourselves a chance at the end. We have a lot of season left to play. We've got to learn from our early mistakes and keep growing."

The Indians (5-0) face non-district Sherando at home Saturday at 3 p.m., while the Knights (2-4) face Valley District opponent Rocktown at home Tuesday at 7 p.m.

While he hopes the Indians can start to stretch out the lead in future games, Gale can't bat an eye at his team's grit as they rolled to another road victory. "Hopefully, we can keep on winning," Gale said. "We'd like to get a wider margin, but in a perfect world, to come out on top in these close games on the road, there's probably not a better practice or situation for us in the future."

As the Indians remain unbeaten, Braun believes not only does their experience level on the court itself benefit them, but another year of knowledge under Gale's "system" of play has gone a long way in remaining perfect through five games.

"It's a little different than it was last year, but it's similar, so we know what we're doing now," Braun said. "We have quite a bit of older guys on the team that know what they're doing."

Fort Defiance 8 20 22 14 — 64

Turner Ashby 10 16 24 13 — 63

FORT DEFIANCE (5-0) — Whetzel 0 0-0 0, Hebb 1 0-2 2, Ransome 2 0-2 5, Armendariz Cruz 6 4-6 16, Uribe 0 0-0 0, Braun 3 2-4 10, Berry 1 0-0 2, Martin 2 0-0 4, Pultz 2 0-0 4, Hanger 4 0-0 10, Batten 0 0-0 0, Thornton 0 2-2 2, Gutshall 3 3-3 9. Totals 24 11-19 64.

TURNER ASHBY (2-4) — Shifflett 3 0-0 7, Moyers 0 0-0 0, Alley 0 0-0 0, Lacey 10 2-2 29, Riner 0 2-2 2, Perez 5 0-0 11, Kyomuhendo 2 0-1 4, Judd 0 0-0 0, Good 5 0-0 10. Totals 25 4-5 63.

3-Point Goals — Fort Defiance 5 (Braun 2, Hanger 2, Ransome), Turner Ashby 9 (Lacey 7, Shifflett, Perez).